SPECIAL FEATURE: MY METAPHOR

Simplify and Succeed
by Art Levine

In the early 70's the management at the American Stock Exchange wanted a set of automated displays installed on the trading floor. The purpose of the displays was to announce to the public all changes related to the trading of equities.

I had exactly three months to get the work done. Because of local building codes, I was told that the displays that met the specifications would not be available until nine months after the order was placed. This was not acceptable to the Exchange's management.

The project team was in a quandary. I called a meeting to discuss the situation and develop a report explaining why we needed more time. Jokingly, I suggested, "Why not use picket signs?" The Exchange had just gone through some painful labor negotiations. To anyone who had been involved in those negotiations, the thought of a picket sign should have sounded, I thought, like gallows humor. This was not acceptable to the Exchange's management.

To my surprise, the rest of the project team took the idea seriously. Suddenly I realized, Hey, why not? There was agreement all around that it was worth a try. "We could print the necessary information on both sides of the signs and walk them around the floor," somebody said. We were off and running.

Within two weeks the "manual displays" were operational. The hardest part of the project was getting the signs laminated and attached to a stick. Across the top of the sign we wrote, in big letters, TRADING HALT. Across the bottom we put the reason, for example, INFLUX OF ORDERS, and just above that what the stock symbol was, the time of the halt, and the last sale. The floor of the Exchange is the size of a football field, so we had people walking around at different locations with the signs held up over their heads.

People's reaction? The first time the signs appeared a cheer went up from the trading floor. Overall, they were a fantastic success!

This crazy idea--or rather, inelegantly simple solution--solved the problem. It met the Exchange's requirements, and more importantly, for $200 it bought us the time to put in place the long-term solution, which cost $2,000,000.

Fittingly, the picket signs now appear only in the Stock Exchange museum.
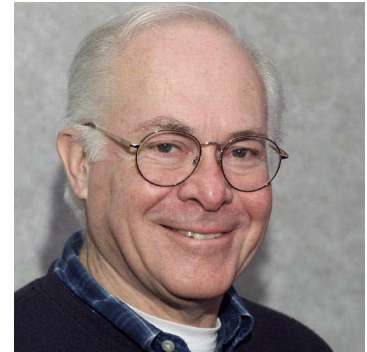
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Art Levine has been an information systems professional for more than 25 years, and has conducted Project Management, Business Requirements, Quality Assurance and Strategic Thinking Seminars at a wide variety of organizations. He is also a guest lecturer and a published writer on the subject of managing information systems projects.

Simplify and Succeed (cont'd)

"We knew that we were all out of jobs if we didn't meet the three-months require-ment. "

You don't have to use super-sophisticated technology to get results. Remember, what may now seem like antiquated technology was once state of the art. And it worked fine.

Question

What's your craziest idea that worked as a temporary solution to a pressing problem on a project?

Lessons

- Don't be bashful about suggesting crazy ideas. Sometimes they may just work. Share your crazy thoughts with the team.

- Don't always assume high tech is the best way to solve a problem. Smart solutions can employ low tech as well.